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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: POPE WINS HEARTS AND MINDS BUT DOES NOT
PERFORM A MIRACLE

REF: A. ANKARA 6447

1B. ISTANBUL 2084

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner for reasons 1.4(b),
(d)

1.(U) This cable has been coordinated with Consulate General
Istanbul.

2.(C) Summary: Turks widely perceived Pope Benedict XVI's November 29-December 1 visit to Ankara and Istanbul as a success in diminishing animosity between religions and increasing dialogue between civilizations. Contacts from different sectors of Turkish society, however, do not agree on the lasting impact the visit will have. The GOT saw the visit as effective in relieving tensions and helping Turkey's beleaguered reputation in Europe, but realizes that it must follow up with concrete measures to truly capitalize on the event. The Vatican Embassy and Ecumenical Patriarchate were skeptical that the positive events will translate into bona fide reform from the Turks, who they view as consumed with a paranoia rooted in historical events. Several academics similarly questioned the lasting power of the visit to improve cross-cultural dialogue and diminish Turks' deep-seated suspicion of Christianity. The EU, however, told us that the visit not only eliminated Turks' antipathy toward the Pope, but also enhanced Turkey's position as a builder of bridges between civilizations. End summary.

Pope's Diplomacy Heals Wounds In Historic Visit

3.(U) The long anticipated visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Turkey included several significant surprises that contributed to the widely-held positive perception of his trip. The first occurred when Prime Minister Erdogan unexpectedly greeted the Pope as he disembarked from the plane. (Whether or not PM Erdogan, who was on his way to a NATO summit in Riga, would meet the Pope at all was the subject of much press speculation prior to the visit.) The second occurred when the Pope reportedly told the Prime Minister during their meeting that he supported Turkey's EU membership -- a significant shift from the less enthusiastic opinion he gave as Cardinal Ratsinger in 2004.

4.(U) In Ankara, after a prayer at Ataturk's mausoleum, the Pope briefly met with President Sezer and later with

Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) President (and highest Muslim authority in Turkey) Ali Bardakoglu, where the two stressed the importance of "authentic dialogue" between faiths. The next morning, the Pope visited Izmir and Ephesus, reputed to have been home to the Virgin Mary and John the Apostle. He began the mass at Ephesus in Turkish, and ended by waving a Turkish flag.

5.(U) In Istanbul, he Pope participated in a short religious service with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the "first among equals" of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians.

The two religious leaders issued a common declaration on November 30 shortly after participating in a service celebrating the annual Feast of St. Andrew in honor of the founder of the Orthodox Church in Constantinople.

6.(U) Pope Benedict also met with the heads of other religious minority communities including Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Jewish and Catholic leaders in Turkey. In what was originally perceived as the (diplomatically) riskiest part of his itinerary, Benedict quietly visited the Hagia Sophia museum, formerly a Byzantine Orthodox Cathedral, and surprised everyone by praying at Istanbul's famous Sultanahmet Mosque alongside Istanbul's Grand Mufti while facing Mecca. He ended his trip on December 1 by delivering the homily at the Catholic Cathedral of the Holy Spirit.

GOT: Visit Improved Pope's Image But Failed To Boost Turkey's EU Bid

7.(SBU) MFA Head of Western Europe Department Hasan Asan told
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us December 6 that the Pope's positive gestures helped soothe the animosity generated by the Pope's controversial Regensburg remarks. Asan said that the GOT had hoped that its own gestures would have generated more positive payback from EU leaders, who are seen as unfairly punishing Turkey for refusing to open its ports to Greek Cypriot traffic. Although the Pope's visit sent a positive signal to Muslims, Asan told us, the onus remains on Europe to demonstrate the sincerity of its claims of tolerance and respect for all cultures and religions.

Diyanet: Follow Up Critical To Capitalize
On Positive Dialogue

8.(SBU) Deputy Diyanet President Mehmet Gormez told us that the Pope's "positive, healing message" throughout his visit enormously changed the conviction of the Turkish public. The warm but frank discussion between the Pope and Bardakoglu, according to Gormez, began a constructive dialogue that the Diyanet plans to build on in the coming months and years. Bardakoglu, an outspoken critic of the Pope's Regensburg remarks (see ref A), said steps must be taken to counter rising Islamophobia in the West. The Pope told Bardakoglu that religious clergy should have autonomy from political institutions. Both expressed plans to continue the positive dialogue, according to Gormez.

9.(SBU) Although Gormez characterized the visit as "magnificent", he emphasized that the positive atmosphere created by the Pope's "symbolic gestures" would be lost unless both sides take concrete steps to build on the new momentum. Gormez, who will lead the Diyanet's efforts, is optimistic. He plans to work with the Vatican to arrange a series of exchanges between clergy, academics, and senior-level officials. For the Diyanet, although the visit did not resolve long-standing historical problems, it created a new atmosphere of calm and hope in which parties have the opportunity to build positive interfaith dialogue.

Vatican Embassy: Pope Steals The Show

10.(C) Vatican Embassy First Secretary Monsignor Christophe El-Kassis told us that the visit improved the Pope's image but would have little effect in altering the fundamental problems between Christianity and Islam. The Pope's words, and symbolic gestures, such as praying in the Blue Mosque and meeting with Bardakoglu after he had "vilified the Pope", surprised and impressed a skeptical Turkish public, according to El-Kassis. He told us the Vatican was pleased that the Pope helped raise awareness of the Patriarchate's problems, improved his image among Turks, and started a productive dialogue between religions. El-Kassis was not sure, however, that the visit would have a greater long-term impact. The GOT's genuine interest was not to usher in a new era of inter-faith dialogue, he told us, but rather to resuscitate Turkey's image in the West, in order to revive languishing EU negotiations and increase tourism. El-Kassis noted that following the visit the GOT requested (and received) the Vatican's permission to use the image of the Pope waving a Turkish flag in a new tourism campaign in Europe.

Ecumenical Patriarchate Skeptical About Visit's Benefits

11.(C) Contacts from the Patriarchate told us the visit was positive for intra-Christian and Christian-Muslim relations, but they thought it would do little to rectify the problems the Greek Orthodox Church faces in Turkey. Metropolitan Meliton, a Senior Advisor to the Patriarch, said the Pope's offer to intercede with the GOT is unlikely to help, due to the Turkish "deep state's" aversion to granting rights to Turkey's Greek minority. In particular, Meliton said he believes that GOT will continue to refuse to recognize the Patriarch's title of "Ecumenical", or first among equals, among his fellow Patriarchs. Meliton said the GOT has an unfounded fear that its recognition of the term would violate

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Turkey's secular tradition by granting a religious institution legal status, which could ultimately lead to a Vatican-like establishment in Turkey. The Patriarchate has consistently denied such an intention. While the Pope's visit was an extremely significant event in the life of the Patriarchate, Meliton concluded, it would not be enough to change Turkey's deep-seated fears of Greek aspirations.

Academics: Visit As A Short-Term Fix, Not Long Term Solution

12.(SBU) Several academics expressed the view that the Pope's visit did little to change the fundamental Turkish view that Christianity is synonymous with the West, and that both are a threat to Turkish sovereignty. Dr. Ahmet Kizikaya, an EU scholar and human rights expert, told us that the Pope's conciliatory gestures prevented large-scale demonstrations but could not undo hundreds of years of history, which have caused Turks to perceive Europe as a "Christian alliance" encroaching on Turkish sovereignty. He predicted the opposition parties will tap into this perception during next year's elections by criticizing the ruling party, AKP, for its cooperation with Western institutions, such as the EU and the Vatican. Ankara University Professor Tayfun Atay told us that although the Pope "did all the right things" to improve interfaith dialogue and decrease tension, underlying tension would resurface prior to the 2007 elections.

EU: For Turks, He Came as Cardinal Ratsinger
And Left As The Pope

13.(SBU) EU Commission Turkey's Deputy Political Counselor Serap Ocak told us December 5 that Turkey nearly lost an historic opportunity due to early missteps such as the PM's decision to leave Turkey during the visit. Fortunately, the GOT ultimately embraced the visit as a chance to enhance Turkey's position as a builder of bridges between civilizations, said Ocak. She told us that even though Turks by nature will always be suspicious of Western symbols such as the Papacy, they no longer feel antipathy toward the Pope.

"In Turks' eyes," said Ocak, "he came as Cardinal Ratsinger but left as a global Pope." Although opposition political parties may try to portray negatively the AKP's involvement with the Pope in upcoming elections, Ocak believes the AKP will ultimately reap the benefits from an event which softened European views of Muslims.

14.(C) Comment: The Pope's visit succeeded in turning around negative Turkish public opinion. Although many of our contacts were skeptical regarding visit's lasting impact, the Pope's ability to change Turkey's perception of him demonstrates a willingness to heal wounds and help bridge divides. After his remarks in Regensburg, Turkish leaders, media outlets, and the public had called for the visit to be canceled. During the visit, his actions won widespread media praise, which overshadowed small protests by fringe groups. The Pope's symbolic power is likely to serve as a catalyst for further rapprochement between Turkey and Europe, East and West, Islam and Christianity and, perhaps, within the Christian world too. End comment.

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